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A Spiritual Odyssey of Quest for the Mysteries of Life: A Study of Paulo Coelho's Fiction

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A Spiritual Odyssey of Quest for the Mysteries of Life:

A Study of Paulo Coelho's Fiction

The present research work is a study of the selected fiction of the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho. The principal objective of the study is to examine critically the selected novels of the writer in order to highlight his obsession with the various types of quests human beings undertake in life.

The origin of the present research problem is rooted in the very life of human being. From the beginning of the human history, human life is viewed as an odyssey in search of one thing or the other. Though the modern man enjoys many privileges and facilities in comparison to the primitive one, his search in life has not come to an end. On the contrary the highly awakened mind of the modern man, in turn, has raised many expectations from life, thus setting him on a journey to fulfill those expectations.

Born in Rio-de-Janeiro, Brazil in 1970, Paulo Coelho lived his early life as most controversial one; being involved in the "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" of hippie life. He found very earlier in his life that he liked to be a writer but his parents were disagreed, who thought it has no future in Brazil. He joined law school but after deciding that law school was not for him, he travelled through much of South America, North Africa, Mexico and Europe. Returning to Brazil after two years, he began a successful career as a popular songwriter.

In 1980 he, experienced one of the defining moments if life; he walked the 500-mile road of Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. On this ancient highway used for centuries by pilgrims from all of the Europe to get to the Cathedral

said to house the remains of St. James, he achieved self-awareness and spiritual awakening that he later described in ***The Pilgrimage***. The fictional works of Paulo Coelho are a complex mixture of tradition and modernity as well as mysticism and reality. An individual's concern for self and a spiritual quest for self-realization are central to almost all of his work.

The present research work attempted to study his novels with the objective of highlighting his fascination with the various types of quests human beings undertake in life.

Novels under Consideration

The present research work has studied the following novels of Paulo Coelho:

1. ***The Pilgrimage***
2. ***The Alchemist***
3. ***Brida***
4. ***The Witch of Portobello***
5. ***The Zahir***
6. ***By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept***

The Chapter Scheme

The research work is divided into five chapters. They are outlined as follows:

Chapter I Introduction

Chapter I introduces the objectives and the broad areas of the study. As spiritualism and mysticism are the major aspects of the present study, a detailed explanation of their meaning and a survey of their tradition are carried out. As Paulo Coelho's own life involves in a quest of different objectives at different

stages of life, the chapter I gives his short biography that helps to enhance the better understanding of the description of various types of search as described in his works.

Apart from a short introduction to the following chapters, the first chapter describes what it means by spiritual odyssey and mysteries of life in the context of the present study. At the same time it tries to analyze the different mysteries of life. As a requisite of the study an attempt is made to define quest and state various objectives of a quest, such as treasure or wealth, knowledge, truth, peace, a promised land, a person, an object like Grail or wisdom.

Almost all quest themes follow a particular pattern and this structure of the journey of a questing hero is best described by an American mythologist, Joseph Campbell. His seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* describes the theory of journey of the archetypal hero found in the world mythologies. Campbell describes a number of stages or steps along this journey. But some of the theorists have described a quest as a twelve stage journey as follows. Not each of the above stage may be the part of every quest, but almost all the quest stories, irrespective of their mythical, medieval or modern context and time, share some of the principal stages of the journey.

Faced with insurmountable obstacles, insoluble mystery, or an enemy with powers that surpass their own, even the mightiest heroes need help to reach their goals.The study also highlights how the quester is helped by various agencies including helpers and guides. Two main types of recurrent characters that help and guide heroes are The Wise Old Man and the Good Mother.

An attempt is made to describe in detail the evolution of stories in quest pattern as well as describing quest as a basic plot structure and literary devise. It is found that

the quest was essential to romance. It is also an essential element of much narrative literature. Various mythological and historical instances of quest are briefly studied for their patterns, objectives and evolutions. The study of various romances include Grail as a common objective, hence Grail has been presented here as an archetype of quest objective. At the same time Buddha's journey for Enlightenment is studied here as a historical instance of quest.

In the first chapter the examples of epics like *Ramayan* and *Odyssey* are cited to exemplify the relation between epic and quest as well as a brief survey of literature of quest from medieval to modern is undertaken.

Chapter II: In Search of a Personal Myth

Coelho's ***The Alchemist*** and ***The Pilgrimage*** are concerned with the journey for the sake of a long cherished dream. The present chapter deals with these two novels. It focuses light on the writer's fascination with the essential wisdom of listening to one's own heart and above all, following one's own path. Both the novels are the works that are part adventure story and part guide to self-mastery. They teach us the lesson that life is a journey that we should undertake as an adventure. These works also make us believe that at every bend on the road of our life, a mystery is waiting to unfold and that the miracles are an everyday occurrence.

The Alchemist is examined as a stimulating novel that reiterates that everything is possible as long as the person really wants it to happen. The study unfolds how the journey of Santiago, who has a dream and the commitment to pursue. It also reveals how the boy, after listening to "the sign", ventures on a journey of exploration and self discovery, symbolically searching for a hidden treasure. In the

novel, Coelho lays great stress on the significance of good omen during a journey. The moral of the story speaks of the "soul of the world" and that the Earth wants you to be happy. This story tells how each one of us has a single mission, goal or personal legend, though most of us do not realize it.

After listening to "the sign", Santiago ventures in his personal, Ulyssess- like journey of exploration and self discovery, symbolically searching for a hidden treasure located near the Pyramids in Egypt. The mystery of the whole quest is that it amazingly ends in his own country, in the region of Andalusia in Spain. The surprise ending, in which the boy discovers that his treasure lies not at the pyramids, as his dream had foretold, but back at the abandoned church in Spain where his journey began, has powerful implications about the significance of looking into the roots and foundation of our lives, journeying outward to find the way back home, and trusting our dreams even when it seems they have slipped beyond our reach.

The Pilgrimage is analyzed for its perfect combination of enhancement and insight. It is a story of Coelho's journey of self-discovery. It expresses the human side of Coelho's philosophy and the depth of his search. At the same time it is contemporary quest for ancient wisdom carried out on a legendary road across Spain, travelled by pilgrims of Santiago. This journey becomes a truly initiatory experience and Paolo Coelho is transformed forever as he learns to understand the nature of truth through the simplicity of life.

Along the Road he is helped by a guide, Petrus, who teaches Coelho the RAM exercises to do with promoting Rigor, Adoration and Mercy. The Seed Exercise, the Speed Exercise, the Water Exercise and the Blue Sphere Exercise are some of a large number of exercises that are described and taught by the guide. The

Tradition, of which Coelho attempts to be a master, is mysteriously esoteric and eclectic, as it includes secret meetings, saying passwords, discovering a monk who is a sorcerer and fighting a dog that personifies the devil. Coelho underscores the benefits of such a journey including the chance to forget about work, the lesson about how to face one's fears, the importance of dreaming and the gaining of new perspectives.

Chapter III: Quest for Heart's True Path

Chapter III is a study of Coelho's two novels *viz.* ***Brida***, and ***Witch of Portobello*** for their depiction of the human efforts to gain wisdom and power. The novels examined in this chapter offer its readers the struggle of women to gain certain power, wisdom and their desired objective. Both the novels depict the female protagonists, who are forced by their inborn capabilities to gain recognition. For such recognition they required to struggle not only with the society but themselves as well.

Brida, a moving tale of love, passion, and mystery, is a story of a young beautiful Irish girl and her quest for knowledge. ***Brida*** is a story of a young Irish girl, who sets out to discover her purpose in life. Finding herself leaning towards magic and mysticism, she hopes to learn the secrets of life and existence. At the same time her journey side by side becomes a quest for love. During her journey she meets a wise man who teaches her how to overcome her fears and a woman who teaches her how to dance to the hidden music of the world. They see in her a gift, but must let her undertake her own voyage to discover it. As Brida seeks her destiny, she struggles to find a balance between her relations and her desire to transform herself. The novel describes and brings into focus the concept of soul mate.

On the other hand, ***Witch of Portobello*** portrays another type of search wherein the objective for life is not obvious and clearly stated for everyone at the outset. It is revealed by its own during the wanderings of life. The odyssey of Athena could better be called wanderings of a gifted and courageous woman for acceptance, enlightenment and a truer path. Almost half of her life she is unable to realize her objective in life and runs after one thing or the other. From her early childhood she tries to develop the gifts naturally revealed through some of her deeds. But it is much later in the novel that she comes to know her capability: her gift of connecting herself with the Mother Goddess through a dance. This connection in turn makes her understand the unstated and unknown problems of people and suggest them relative remedies. She uses her power to answer issues that human beings face in the matters like love, sex, cowardice, dormant illness and many others. She also realizes that she could be the representative of the Goddess religion and the feminine part of divine. She preached freedom to choose, to consecrate one's own bread, to awaken one's particular gifts, with no help from guides or shepherds. In order to realize this power within herself, she has to wander through time and space for almost whole of her life. This wandering is considered as her odyssey in life.

Chapter IV: Exploration of Faith and Meaning of Love

Chapter IV deals with the uncanny fusion of philosophy, love, romance, and the importance of following the heart's true path in Coelho's novels ***The Zahir*** and ***By the River Piedra I sat and wept***.

The Zahir, Subtitled as a ***Novel of Obsession*** revolves around an accomplished, unnamed author of international bestseller. Through ***The Zahir*** Coelho presents the philosophical and spiritual chronicle of a man's quest for self discovery. The novel

centers on the narrator's search for his missing wife, Esther, a journalist and a war correspondent. She has helped him for pursuing his dream of becoming a writer. One day he found her missing. Frustrated and shocked, the narrator is unable to figure out the reason of his wife's disappearance. With the help of Mikhail, Esther's friend and a translator he learns that she has left in search of peace and happiness as she had troubles living with her husband.

While examining the reasons of her disappearance, and his married life he realizes that in order to find Esther he must "find himself". The idea of finding his wife becomes an obsession with the protagonist and she becomes his zahir, which in Arabic means an visible, present, incapable of going unnoticed. Then one day Mikhail finds the narrator and takes him to his wife. Mikhail introduces the narrator to a global underground "tribe" of spiritual seekers. The narrators search for his wife and for the truth of his own life, takes him from South America, Spain, France, Croatia and eventually the bleakly beautiful landscape of Central Asia. Through the narrator's journey Coelho explores the various meanings of love and life. The novel is a journey from a stagnant marriage and love to the realization of unseen, ever increasing attraction between two souls.

Similarly the novel ***By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*** explores the theme of faith, love, a journey symbolizing the route towards self discovery and miracles of following the heart's true path. Through this novel Coelho gives a message that, when it comes to love and God there are no rules.

Its heroine Pilar, a young woman from the Spanish countryside, who sparked by the teachings of a new mysterious man she has known and loved since childhood, leaves her graduate studies and embarks on a spiritual pilgrimage through the Pyrenees Mountains and reevaluates her life and her future. Pilar in the

company of her former boyfriend learns over the course of seven days that the spiritual path is traveled by means of the daily experience of love.

The love between Pilar and her lover develops through many levels; the childhood love they felt, love hidden behind the oppressed feelings and when they reunite, the liberated love they felt for each other and the faith through which they conquer their dreams. At an age when everything has been discovered, Coelho suggests that there are greater discoveries to be made: those of the spirit. The two lovers discover that all people can speak the language of angels and perform miracles.

Chapter V: Conclusion

The last chapter sums up the whole study by arriving at certain configurations about the spiritual odyssey and the various quests of different characters by. This study of Paulo Coelho's fictions has a potential to reveal his explorations of various meanings of dreams, love and life. It will show how the attempts of quest for one's own identity results in the successful recognition.

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